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CONSTANTS AND ELECTIVES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

THIS whole subject of electives has been not a little befogged by the writers in our educational journals who have treated the matter as though all the conditions of the German gymnasium and the American high school were similar, save only those of latitude and longitude; while the fact is, that since the schools are an integral and inseparable part of the social and political status of a country, we cannot logically consider the former save in connection with the latter. In Germany, class distinctions and boundary lines, which may only be passed with the greatest difficulty, mark every step of progress from the primary school to, and through the university; while in the United States no such distinctions are thought of in our school systems, however much they may figure in the kaleidoscopic imaginations of populistic campaign orators. The famous simile of the educational ladder, with its foot in the gutter and its top in the university, is in this favored country no poetic fancy, but portrays in vivid language a fact many times verified in the knowledge of every intelligent adult. Every high-school teacher of experience can cite you many cases where the son or daughter of the coachman outstrips, not only in school but in the competition for literary and political honors, the son or daughter of the millionaire who rides behind the coachman. Here it is an open field, a fair fight and no favors, where the best may win and do win, even though poverty may often prove a great hindrance in the race. Such a condition of things is well nigh incomprehensible to the adult German. Bear in mind that we are now speaking not of our richly endowed, so-called "fitting schools" like Exeter and Andover, which bear some distant resemblance to the German gymnasia, but of the free high school, fostered and supported by public tax in each corporate community. If we rightly understand the case, our free schools supported by the inhabitants of every political unit from the school district to

the state by self-imposed taxes have no counterpart in Germany, if indeed in any state in Europe.

In a country with an hereditary government, a titled aristocracy and privileged classes, where the few are born to command and the many to obey, where in fact obedience to rulers is the highest civic virtue, there is nothing incongruous in having the lines of education fixed hard and fast by a central ministry of education, who may leave little or nothing to the option of the individual or the local community. But our country could no more adapt itself to such a system than to the form of civic government in Germany.

The masses (in Germany) are debarred by higher authority from participating in the benefits of the secondary schools which they are taxed to support. Even in Germany there is not an entire satisfaction with the arrangement. The later reform movements indicate that the people at least wish to secure some form of instruction common to all the lower classes, which will enable all to pursue a higher course subsequently if pecuniary conditions permit. . . . The European system is distinctly a class system. Only those possessed of at least moderate means can hope to secure the benefits of higher education. Newsboys and bootblacks can never hope to rise above their station. The more we can do to strengthen the continuity between primary and secondary schools, the greater will be the strength of our educational system. By extending the benefits of education to all alike, as we are surely doing, we need not be troubled with Germany's hallucinations with a land filled with "hungry candidates," the result of over-education.¹

In the eastern states, where our free public-school system had its origin, the school was eminently a *town* institution, and as in New England the town was the mother of the state, so the public school has been a matter of *local* management rather than of state control. If in this respect there has been a loss in school efficiency, it has been offset, in part at least by local pride and personal interest in the school as an institution belonging to the people of the community.

You may demonstrate over and over again that uniform and fixed curricula—the same for all communities in the United States, would be an improvement, and yet the tradition and custom of nearly three hundred years cannot be overturned in a year or a decade.

¹ *Secondary School System in Germany*, by T. E. BOLTON.

But more than this, the opinion of the best educators, while acknowledging the weaknesses of our system, favors the American rather than the German plan. I know that many will deny that we have a system; but whether we have or not, we find even in Germany a belief that we have, and a growing, progressive party there demanding "educational reforms" in the line of what they term the "American system."

The fact is that Germany with all her solidity is moving towards the so-called "American system" much more rapidly than we are approaching the German system. Space forbids us to quote here the opinion of the eminent educators of the present day, led by such men as Eliot and Butler, who favor a large degree of freedom on the part of the high-school pupils in selecting their subjects.

The trend is all in one direction, and we can no more stop it or turn it back in its course than we can dam up the Niagara or cause the Hudson to flow northwards. The problem is in good hands and will be wrought out to the finish. Men may deny that we have in this country any well organized system of education; and if by that term is meant a scheme organized by a central ministry at Washington, the statement is correct; but the fact remains that we have a system, which with all its crudities is, like our social and political system of which it is a part, distinctively American; it will in due time be wrought out to completeness, and I have no more doubt of its final supremacy—and by this I mean its perfect adaptation to our needs—than of the final supremacy of representative government.

As it is neither desirable nor expedient to adopt a rigid curriculum, the same for all secondary schools in a state and for all pupils in a school, neither can we with safety adopt the other extreme, and allow unlimited choice of subjects among high-school pupils. The principle of electives in large high schools is still in its infancy. Even in colleges its evolution has not been continuously progressive, but, like most reforms, its course has been somewhat of a zigzag. At Harvard, the mother of colleges and the leader in the so-called elective system, it has been found expedient to adopt the system of election by *courses* rather

than by *subjects*. The same reasons which render it wise to limit the selection of subjects in college operate with tenfold force in the high school.

In the smaller high schools, while we usually find a limited number of constants, regarded as essentials in *all* advanced education, classes in other subjects are likely to be formed according to the wish of the pupils, or the equipment of the faculty, rather than according to a fixed program. Hence it may happen, that the small school by its very limitations sometimes offers opportunities for electives which are denied in larger and better equipped institutions. This is very likely to be the case if a few parents, or even pupils of good standing, call for a class in this, that, or the other subject. For this reason the old-time academy, barring a few special fitting schools, was conducted largely on the elective principle, though we are accustomed to think and speak of this latter as one of the "*fin de siècle*" ideas.

But when we come to the large high school we meet with greater difficulties in the way of freedom in selecting, or electing subjects. Perhaps the first difficulty to be met, provided the principal favors a large degree of freedom on the part of pupils in selecting their subjects, would be the conservatism of the members of the faculty. The tendency in our city high schools is toward departmental teaching and a long term of service on the part of the teacher. Thus it not unfrequently happens that the principal is the "junior member of the firm" in point of service, and he may find the so-called "heads of the departments" opposed to all innovations not initiated by themselves. Besides being wedded to the "course of study" as it is, there is always danger, in their eyes, lest their own department be neglected or possibly side-tracked, if students are allowed any considerable degree of choice in their subjects. We are not objecting to the departmental system, and least of all do we object to the long tenure of teachers, but we are pointing out the difficulties to be overcome in introducing electives.

According to the Homeric theogony one might bribe, cajole, or circumvent the deities, but back of the gods of Olympus were the fates, like the modern bosses back of the legislators; so there

might be a substantial agreement among the members of the faculty, but the members of the board of public instruction, having "made a course of study," might refuse all interference with the same, in which case there could be no change until a new election, or a new appointment should reconstruct the fates.

But if there should be general unanimity between the board and faculty, the next difficulty is the great disproportion in the ratio of pupils to teachers. Suppose we have twenty-five teachers and 800 pupils; deducting your special teachers of music, drawing, manual training, elocution, etc., we have left for general class-room work, eighteen or twenty teachers, and giving to each teacher four or five exercises, or classes per day, and to each pupil four or five recitation exercises per day, it will be readily seen that the number of subjects that can be taught beyond what most would agree are essentials (hence constants), must be very limited. This is especially the case in a departmental school where certain teachers are designated as belonging to the Latin, mathematics, English departments, etc. In such cases surplus Latin teachers could not, at the will of the principal, be transferred to the science department, nor could elective classes in English be assigned to the teachers of German and French.

Again, the pupils lack the experience necessary to enable them to choose intelligently. Says President Tucker, "Choice is a matter of judgment and judgment is not a product of immaturity." Call to mind the high-school pupils as you and I have known them. They enter at ages varying from thirteen to fifteen. Most of them come from homes of respectability, but few from homes of culture. Their stock of ideas is yet too limited to enable them to decide what studies are best for them, or even what subjects they are likely to pursue with most interest. They have no reliable data on which to found a choice, and are as incapable of selecting the subjects or order of their studies as I should be of deciding upon an agricultural system for the inhabitants of Mars, and for the same reason—lack of proper experience or knowledge.

While our high schools do not exist for the purpose of fitting

pupils for higher institutions, it is a fact that many tax-paying parents send their children to the free high school as a preparation for college or technical school. These pupils, while a small minority of the whole, are a very important minority, and the entrance conditions, fixed by higher institutions rightly have much influence in fixing certain subjects as constants in all high schools—such, for instance, as English, geometry, algebra, and history. But if it could be shown that there is a valuable residue of pupils capable of choosing for themselves, and unable to reach a higher institution, it would be well-nigh impossible to provide for them special courses in any department, from the fact that most schools lack the facilities, or properly trained teachers, or both, to do the work required in any specialized, advanced course. It may be that we have very good teachers in algebra and geometry who are yet unequal to instruction in calculus or quaternions, even if their time were not already overmortgaged to the elementary constants. The same might be true in regard to quantitative analysis in chemistry, or advanced study in physics. What we maintain is that electives in the high schools beyond those usually allowed, are of little importance unless the term signifies the privilege to do specialized work, far in advance of that ordinarily provided for. No one complains that we have not already sufficient “smatterings,” but for the reasons we have endeavored to state, the outlook is not encouraging for introducing an extended system of electives, if these are to include work beyond the barest elements. It is all very well to say, “if we have not the equipment, get it;” but I think we may be content if we can have high schools well equipped for secondary work. It was never intended that they should be universities, nor is it desirable that they should be.

Since then the hard and fast system of the German gymnasium and absolute freedom in the selection of subjects are alike undesirable and impracticable, we must seek some golden mean best adapted to our needs. The following seems to be a reasonable solution of the problem: Parallel courses, three or more, differing but slightly in the work of the first year with no room for options beyond a choice of courses; for the second year to

further differentiate the courses most of the subjects in each still being prescribed; for the third and fourth years, constants or required subjects, to be fewer and consequently a larger number of electives allowed.

As an illustration let us cite the instance of a certain high school, not as ideal but workable. The school numbers about 800 pupils and claims to present four courses of study, but in reality these differ in almost nothing the first year, but a foreign language. Each pupil chooses whether he will take Latin, French, or German; but all are required to take English, physiology, history, and algebra. These may not be the best constants but they seem to be proper and necessary subjects for pupils beginning secondary work. For the second year those who wish, may begin a second foreign language (which constitutes the classical course), while the others will in place of a second foreign language take a year of physics; but all will take geometry and rhetoric.

Foreign language selections are now supposed to be made for the course and in the third year there are options of solid geometry, bookkeeping, higher algebra, and botany; but all not taking a second foreign language take a year of English literature. In the fourth year, pupils are ready to determine whether or not they intend to continue their education beyond the high-school. Those who expect to continue are allowed to choose various subjects according as they may be required for entrance to the particular institution which they wish to enter.

As a rule all those who do not wish to prepare for a special institution are perfectly satisfied to follow a prescribed course with a few options. It is always understood that a pupil following a specified course may select as much extra work from other courses as he is mentally and physically capable of accomplishing.

This plan provides, so far as the school equipment will allow, for pupils who wish a preparation for higher institutions, and for those whose schooling terminates with the completion of a high-school course. There may still be some (in my experience the number is small but it contains cases worthy of provision) who

do not care especially for the school diploma or a preparation for a particular college, or who from circumstances beyond their immediate control, have but a limited time in which they can attend the high school, and therefore desire instruction in certain subjects which, to them at least, seem a sort of "paramount issue" as compared with others in prescribed courses. If these upon investigation prove to belong to the "hobo" class in search of something in exchange for nothing, it is easy after a short trial to pass them on with a certificate of worthlessness.

But worthy cases will be found like the following: Resident graduates of your own school who wish to take up some subjects which they were unable to pursue during their course, or who desire to strengthen themselves on some subject which to them was difficult, and in which their record was unsatisfactory; graduates or others from other secondary schools who wish to pursue some subjects which were not taught in their previous school; those who wish to enter a technical school upon the shortest possible preparation; and lastly, boys and sometimes girls from the country who are obliged to "go a term and skip a term" meanwhile getting up certain subjects by themselves between times.

I may only add in this connection that the boy or girl entering your high school without any previous experience in secondary-school work is, with the rarest exceptions, in no condition to choose subjects outside of the first year courses of study, for the simple reason that those are as a rule the only subjects taught in school with which he is competent to deal. But all pupils who can give a valid reason for preferring special subjects for which they have had the previous proper training should be allowed the privilege, provided they can enter classes already formed in those subjects.

To briefly recapitulate then our plan; (1) a choice in courses; (2) privilege of taking any extra work of which the pupils are capable and thus shortening the time required for earning a diploma; (3) the privilege of substituting in the third and fourth years subjects in one course for those in another, provided the exchange is an equivalent; (4) privilege of entering any classes

formed in the regular course for which the applicant is fitted, for the purpose of doing special work.

The one and the only safeguard necessary, so far as my experience goes, is that in every instance where a departure from one of the prescribed courses is asked for, the request must be made in writing by the parent and approved by the principal. In case of non-approval by the principal an appeal should be open to the superintendent or the board. But in the nature of the case they can know nothing of the merits of the application except through the principal or faculty.

The plan above outlined provides amply for those in preparation for college, those for whom the high school is a *finishing school*, and enables those who cannot secure the whole to get a part, and what—to them at least—is the best part of the high-school course.

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